

featuring:

ISSUE II
VOLUME I

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Martin Brick



an underground collective of
individual expression

A Few Lines Magazine

An underground collective of individual expression
Volume I Issue II

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Thank you for reading.

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A Note on Color:

To aid our readers in finding the selections that will most interest them we have added a color designator for each type of work found in our magazine. The titles of all Art, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Short Fiction featured herein will be underlined in the colors above.

To the Readers,

If we're honest with ourselves, a part of each of us acknowledges that it's kind of hard to believe that this magazine would ever get to this point. We've read an unexpected amount of work over the past five months, which is truly amazing because our time here at *A Few Lines* has proven to be an invaluable learning experience. The quality of the work in this issue you're about to read is of the highest standard, and we're all very proud to be publishing it. This issue, in short, is awesome; but before we send you on your merry way into the literary playground that is *AFL*, we'd like to splurge a bit and let you in on what's been happening these last few months.

The summer was a bit turbulent, to say the least. Three of the seven editors went to China for over a month to teach English as a Second Language and were virtually ousted from the editing process. However, our team is strong, and we ended up publishing an eclectic variety of scintillating work. Once everyone was back, we decided to print the first issue of this magazine, which is set to make its debut on the 27th of September, 2011. Upon making this decision to print, we were prompted to establish a publishing name, and now *A Few Lines* proudly publishes under the new-found company, Rough Writers Publishing. The creation of RWP is one of the first of many critical steps towards making something substantive in the ever-growing literary e-zine/print magazine world, and for that, we must set some time apart to acknowledge our readers.

Readers, we'd like to say how much we appreciate you, but we hope that the fruits of our labor will be enough to demonstrate to you how much we care. This issue is for you, and we sincerely hope you enjoy all the

pieces. They truly are amazing pieces of art, which we hand-picked with you all in mind, and we're certain you'll be pleased with what we've presented you.

With that being said, we need to express our gratitude to our contributors. You guys seriously continue to impress. We're so fortunate to have published your work. The success of our magazine relies on the quality of the work we project into the literary realm, and you're all making us look like we've been publishing for much longer than we have.

Last but definitely not least, we must make one more acknowledgment. This one goes out to our phenomenal patrons. Patrons, (you know who you are) we cannot begin to thank you enough for your generous contributions to the first issue of our magazine. The cost of the first issue was covered by you, so in essence, you are the people directly responsible for the conception of RWP. We can't thank you in stock or trade options, but we hope you know how eternally grateful we are for your continual support (that and we hope you enjoy your hard copies of the first issue). Thank you so much.

So there you have it, folks. I'd like to officially welcome you all to the second issue. Again, we sincerely hope you all find something special in this issue - we're certainly proud of everything we've put forward. We hope this issue gives you some sense of hope that literature is alive and well, and that it's still being crafted by deft hands, but, more importantly, we hope you love what you see.

Happy Reading.

Cheers,
The Editors

Do you wanna rock our socks? Become a patron! A 20 dollar donation will get your name on this page of our second issue, as well as a personalized copy of our second issue. To donate, go to the donation page at www.afewlinesmagazine.com and, like those below, be recognized as someone who fucking rocks.

People who Fucking Rock - Issue One:

David Angelino
 Wade Whittaker
 Cory Goodin
 Bernice & Mitch Killian
 Hazel Gonzalez
 Lupe Martinez
 The Cochran Family
 Kim Kuckowicz
 Briana Ruvalcaba
 Cameron Lund
 Ashley Evans
 Derek Glassick
 Liam Corley
 Stephanie Belen

Projection Explained

It's 2:00 a.m. My parents are asleep and I am carousing around the kitchen. This is not unusual. We seem to have this understanding. So long as this doesn't disrupt my schoolwork and I don't bother them, I can keep whatever hours I like. Feels oddly adult-like, but they say it goes back to my babyhood sleep schedule. I've always been one to sleep early, wake up, then go back to bed later after a few hours of quiet activity.

Making a grilled cheese. When I switch off the light to leave the kitchen, I see a man looking in the window of the back door. He was hidden behind the glare, but with the kitchen dark I clearly see him, staring in, standing perfectly still, unmoving, more like a painting than a person.

The sight of him made me drop the milk and it broke. Our milk comes in glass bottles. Mom keeps insisting that it is better than the milk that comes in plastic cartons from the supermarket. She's projecting. That's her word. Not for milk, but for everything else. It means to assume that someone else feels a certain way when you are actually the one who feels that way. Like she constantly accuses her boss of projecting when he says that she is unproductive and lets her personal life overshadow work, when according to Mom that is all her boss ever does – worry about his personal life. Don't get me started on how Dad supposedly projects his insecurities and anxieties onto their marriage. God, it's gotten so I don't even want to ride in a car with Mom. I'm so sick of her talking to me about Dad like I'm an adult and also not a daughter to either of them. So my analysis is that Mom needs to believe that some things in life are better than other things, and thus the milk. If we drink better milk we're living a good, secure life.

But the milk broke when I saw the man at the window. I slipped and fell in the puddle and there was wetness that was cold, or maybe warm, all around my hands, and I felt my pajamas getting wet, but couldn't take my eyes off the man in the window. He had a beard - a short, neat one. He didn't knock. He didn't run. He looked at me patiently. I think he felt sorry I fell. I think he was jealous of my grilled cheese.

And then I realized who he was. He was the man who drives that street cleaner. You know, the big square machine with the two brushes underneath. It always comes through

late at night. About 2:00. I hear it when I can't sleep and sometimes I've watched it from my window. I've seen the man stop the machine and get out to move someone's trash can if it has blown into the street. He's gentle. He places these things back by people's driveways without getting angry, never tossing anything. The garbage men are always in a hurry. They hurl things. They cling to the backs of their trucks and look as if they want to push it faster, but at the same time barely able to hold on. Like Mom in the morning. And though the street cleaner wears a jacket like the garbage men, a blue one with a gray patch on the arm, he's nothing like them.

He must be looking in because he's lonely. Because it's tough to work at 2:00 a.m. when everyone else is asleep and to sleep when everyone else is awake. So maybe he looks in windows to remind himself of what people are really like. I bet he doesn't have a wife. No kids. He just wants to know how people live. Like we watch t.v. and project our problems onto the characters, the street cleaner watches lighted windows at 2:00 a.m. Maybe he didn't want the grilled cheese sandwich, but I thought it would be good for me to share, so I opened the door.

-Martin Brick

Submission

Dear Valued Contributor,

We would like to thank you for the sample of
elegiac, lyric, confessional, epic, sonnet, children's, ballad,
free/blank/metered verse, nationalistic, propaganda, romance,
limerick, haiku, quatrain, acrostic, found, Pleiades, or
Dickinsonian

poetry that you sent to us.

It was so quaint.

Unfortunately we are no longer accepting poetry of this type for general
consumption, and we found your relation of your

parent's death, disaster survival, meaningful growth experience,
rape, time spend in prison/military service/seminary, frustration
with youth/age/gender relations/the global economy, loss of
innocence/faith/hope/money, or developing love

a bit trite and not to the taste of modern readers.

For your next attempt we recommend a(n)

uncomfortably pseudo-sexual memory of your father, detailed
description of eating an orange that acts as a metaphor for
modern society, ironically wistful recollection of puberty/ a dentist
visit/a proposal/a rejection letter/your first reading of Faulkner,
reflection on how the writings of Flaubert/Proust/Goethe/Wolfe/
Kierkegaard/Bukowski transformed your perception of the world
(note: reflections on Lawrence/Salinger/Whitman will be burned),
queer reinterpretation of a psalm, any reinterpretation of William
Carlos Williams, unfounded feelings of oppression as a member of
a majority group, or sympathetic but condescending feminism (from
male poets only)

as your subject, for these are truly the beating heart of poetry in these, its final
days.

We appreciate your submission and eagerly anticipate a selection that
better conforms to our desires,

Sincerely,

Insert name of: publication/institution/foundation/
the entire city of New York/graduate review
board/publisher/grant committee/

- Alli Kirkham

Alli Kirkham

Untitled

My poetics have atrophied to the point where they are just little ideas
 Little ideas that spill out on paper like ink blots
 Taking no form, from the realm of forms
 But a dependent design based on the viewer's eye
 So it is a mirror really
 A simply constructed mirror with no twists in rhyme scheme
 I hate rhyme
 And I have no rhythm as the words fall
 Drop-less
 Bottomless
 Beats
 Bluntly resounding
 As they echo heavy in their gracelessness
 Like a jump from a cliff that never turns into a dive
 But a break as a body splits the surface of one element and crashes into another
 Cacophony
 But cacophonies are musical in their dissonance and discord
 There is a consistency in their ugliness
 Roughness repeated is a pattern and therefore a weaved art
 My poetry is pattern-less and takes no a b a or a b b a or a b c a
 Nor any other letter that denotes schema and organization
 No
 Forget the implicit
 My words smack you in the face
 Without metaphor or alliteration to lie you down and lull you to sleep
 They take on the air of absence and shape into misty thoughts that shift too quickly for meaning
 My poetics have dropped try and forgotten fancy
 Becoming crude without code
 They sag down towards the ground as they slur and mumble in inebriation
 They go unheard
 My poetry is dying
 As it slips into free verse
 The lack of punctuation holds it back from ever
 Ever existing as example
 Ever sounding soundly
 Shape is shot
 Diction decayed
 But my words are still worth speaking
 Sharp or dull
 I write
 Crappy poems

- D.R. Schertell

Untitled

“the dawn rudely
interrupts the peace
I’ve achieved with
drivel from time
and dumb ecstasy”

the goat in the moat
said to the ghost

“ever see the sun
rise backwards
blue shadows in
the gorge”

birds are singing
in the wasteland

dead seagulls
flail thru the air

finally off life support

suddenly
a mahogany
corridor
of sunshine

then somehow
gentle life
creatures
appeared

-Timothy Collins



Jennifer Yung

Man by Shore

That Was Unexpected

I happened to phone Pato, just to wish him a Happy New Year's, and he told me that he and Sally had broken up again. She had gone back to Ireland; it wasn't clear if it was permanent or not; she said it was; she had sworn it, this time. Apparently, the swearing was supposed to make it different.

In any case, it always hits Pato pretty hard, and it's happened pretty often, and half the reason I phone every few months is because it might happen and he wouldn't say anything, he wouldn't get in touch, he likes just to gnaw at himself, at home, so I asked him how he was holding up, and he said, *oh, you know, the way it goes, alright, I guess*, so I knew he was probably pretty miserable.

Maybe it's for the best, about Sally. You guys were always fighting. Like, who is it for? Who is made happy by it? The being together.

Well. Who is made happy by her going away?

Oh, it's another chance. You might meet someone new. It's a reboot.

*I'm too old for new. I don't meet new people. New people are **anstrengend**.*

Exhausting, is the word. Well, I was thinking of flying up, anyway, one of these weekends. To see you. It's so cheap these days, there's really no excuse. God bless Ryanair.

But their airfield is in nowheresville.

And I have a friend here, Lenka, she's been talking about going to Berlin for a while. We can stay a couple of days, cheer you up, enjoy the nightlife.

Sick of Prague?

Sick? No. But you can always use a weekend away, right?

Don't come for me. I don't want things to happen, on account of me.

Fine. We won't come for you. Maybe we won't even phone you. We will come

despite you. You'll just be one more jam-filled Berliner to us.

Will you come this weekend? Or the weekend in ten days?

I can manage in ten days. But it depends on Lenka.

Come, then. Come if you can. We can... I don't know. We can do stuff.

Sure; I mean; I miss you, Pato. Right? It'll be good to see you. It'll be like old times. Berlin. I'll hardly know the place. It's been almost five years; and it's so close. But there's never any time. Once you actually try and find the time, specifically, exactly, there's never any time.

There's someone at the door. Oh—the pizza. I ordered pizza.

OK. Bye.

Yeah—yeah. Cheers. Come.

Enjoy your pizza.

Seriously; you know; I mean; do come to Berlin.

I got it, Pato.

Right. Bye.

For the record, Pato is called Pato for the following reason: we had a sort of Advanced German class together when we were both at the Freie Universität for an Erasmus program. The teacher, a diminutive stereotype of dryness and strictness, was explaining the genitive case. She was illustrating it with examples like: *in the opinion of the teacher, **des Lehrers**, in the opinion of the female doctor, **der Ärztin**, in the opinion of the parliament, **des Parlaments***. And then we went around the circle, each of us had to give our own example. I remember that mine was in the opinion of *the uncle, **des Onkels***, but Pato was sort of towards the end and he must have felt all the obvious ones were used up and he hesitated before he answered and finally said in the opinion of *the duck, **der Ente***. No one but me thought this

was particularly funny, but I thought it was hilarious, and laughed too conspicuously, then tried to suppress my laughter, also too conspicuously, and I thought also: here is someone I could be friends with, someone whose mind runs to the opinion of ducks. So I made a point of talking to him after class, though usually I am not that forward, and in the end we went for a drink. For a time there was that sexual weirdness because each thought the other might have *arrière-pensées* but *primus* I started seeing someone and about the same time *secundus* he got together, in the relationship's first incarnation, with Sally. So everything was safe and comfortable. That friend you think of to demonstrate to yourself that straight men and women really can be good friends.

I called him Pato because that's duck in Portuguese; he's from Coimbra. He objected to Ente, which I tried first, because the German duck is feminine. Pato stuck, despite some attacks. There was a Chinese girl in our class, and she pointed out that duck in Chinese was slang for a male prostitute; she thought somewhat maliciously he would be upset at the discovery, but actually in the end he took this second meaning as some kind of badge of honour. The nickname spread; people used it leeringly sometimes, which he really enjoyed. The Chinese girl's name was Miao, and at some point he retaliated at her with a Portuguese song about someone who threw a cat admirably—*Mi-ao!* Miao was not amused. And so it goes, international understanding. Step by step, towards world peace.

And then, after my term in Berlin I went back to Prague, and that was that. I mean, that was a job with an advertising firm, running focus groups

to see if international strategies work locally. It's not dull and it pays the bills and it keeps me thinking about culture; I consider myself lucky. Pato stayed on in Berlin, theoretically still enrolled in FU, doing something German in philosophy; he got lost in one of those academic ways; he had some scholarship but took the universe and the world and philosophy all too seriously to ever finish his project, whatever it was. So of course Sally eventually had to give up on him; periodically; and yes even I could see that there were limits to the time one could spend with Pato, dear though he is; some sinister loving magnetism drew them back to each other from time to time; for they were passionate, but passion is just a level of intensity, not an emotion; they were passionately loving or hating or sometimes even passionately bored.

Anyway, Lenka, my Czech friend who had never been to Berlin, agreed to the dates. She had some fixation about Berlin; so do I, maybe, but at least I've lived there. There's that Hildegarde Knef song about still having a suitcase in Berlin; I feel that way; like the city's still waiting there; but then there are all the smarmy songs about Paris and of course every nation has their own sentimental tradition about cities we won't ever see again. There is probably "The Last Time I Saw Calcutta" in Bengali, too. And the actual cities exist alongside them and how can a few trite bars resemble several million people living and working and being as they must also be elsewhere.

Pato lived not far from Alexanderplatz; we took the train in from the airport. I thought he would come down to meet us at the subway station at least, but he just gave us instructions

over the cell phone on how to get to his place; I had forgotten the way.

His place hadn't changed, though. There was his bedroom, and there was a couch. He said, *we'll have to borrow some mat or something for, what's your name?, Lenka. See the couch doesn't roll out. Fold out. Whatever you say.*

Lenka said to me in Czech that he really did look like a duck; and I told her that wasn't why and she said it didn't matter, he looked like it, anyway.

He was disheveled; but that was nothing new. I tried to fix his hair, his collar, but gave up soon enough. He lit up a joint as soon as we came in and offered us wine. There was nothing in the fridge. Heidegger was strewn about; in fact he rolled the joint on *Sein und Zeit*. I thought of that stupid photo of Heidegger in his little village, thinking so deeply and abstractly that he managed to approve of Nazism. That was all I could muster of Heidegger; maybe that was a good thing; any more and you might end up like Pato.

The trip hadn't been arduous, but it was nice to pretend to be tired. We sat around and got a little high and a little drunk and Lenka and Pato made their introductions. They were from where they were from and they did what they did. I thought Pato had brightened at our arrival, and I said, *don't you worry, now we're here to cheer you up. Who's Sally? There is no Sally. The world is Pato and Lenka and Eva.*

I'm glad you're here, Evita. Evinha.

I'm glad you're glad. That is the weekend project: the gladness of Pato.

We went downstairs and had some dñners, which Lenka proclaimed far superior to those of Prague. She was in the mood where everything about Berlin was going to be magnificent. Then she said, when Pato went to the bathroom, *he's kind of cute.*

Pato? Didn't you call him duckish? He's

not really your type, is he?

Oh, I'm not hung up on types.

He hasn't really got his act together. I wouldn't, get, you know. Involved—hung up. You're not serious, are you? We're only here for a weekend.

Oh, I was just saying. He's cute. Can't I say he's cute? This is impermissible?

When Pato came back, we went to a quiet little bar that I remembered being a favourite of his. We had wine, which always strikes me as a waste of money—wine at bars—I'm not sure why. Lenka went out for a cigarette, and I took the opportunity to broach the crucial subject.

So, how are you holding up, without Sally? I mean. Are you doing OK?

Yeah, I'm. You know. I manage.

Do you want to talk about it? Because, you know, we can talk about it; you can talk to me.

Well, you know, what for?

Get it off your, conscience, chest, mind. Whatever.

Sally: she just hasn't grown up. She's still looking, you know. She wanted me to be a desk job. Now. Or a professor. And I want to let myself grow. Grow within.

Did you talk about it?

Endlessly. All we did was talk. We never fought. We just had quiet little talks that hurt each other. You know, all that stuff about communication being the basis of a good relationship or whatever is just bullshit. Talk just means everyone has more weapons to use on each other.

Maybe you could have, I don't know, told her you loved her.

I said so.

Often?

Often enough. Look: we don't have to talk about this.

Yes, but, I'm here to be, you know, here for you. Whenever you need to talk.

Lenka was back, and she wanted to go on to another bar.

I think Pato's quite tired, I said, these

are difficult times for Pato, you know.

Oh, one more bar wouldn't hurt, said Pato, and I didn't like the way he looked at Lenka, or she at him. They were both losing it and liquor only sped the process at the next bar.

When we finally came back to his place Pato dug out another bottle of wine from some cabinet and insisted we go up to the roof.

I don't think we should, I said. *We'll lose all of tomorrow, that way. And we're only here until Sunday night.*

But I want to see the sunrise, said Lenka. *Sunrise in Berlin. Isn't that a song? Su—u—unrise in Berlin.*

That's the tune to "Moonlight in Vermont." Let's go to bed.

Lenka wants to see the sunrise, said Pato, *and I think she should be allowed. How often does one see a Berlin sunrise?*

Never! said Lenka.

Fine then, I said, *let's go up.*

You can go to bed first, if you're tired, said Pato. *Don't stay up, because of us.*

No, I said, I'll join you. I mean, we'll all go together.

We looked at what remained of the stars and even sang *Yesterday* for no particular reason except that there was no other song we all knew, and still there was no sign of pinking. Nor were there any guardrails around the edge of the roof, and it made me nervous. And of course I felt in the way. Me! Who was there to cheer up Pato! I felt like saying to Pato, this is not how I meant to cheer you up! But you don't decide these things. Somehow they were making me feel dirty. I made my excuses and went downstairs and slept on the couch.

There was no mat for a third sleeper; but that no longer seemed necessary. I had a nightmare in which Lenka had fallen off the roof and that when Pato had come down in a panic to tell me, I had said, well, that was unexpected.

I woke at noon and went up to the

roof. They had brought a blanket up from the flat and were there entwined. Actually, not much could have happened. It was not that warm, and they were fully clothed. I criticized myself for thinking that the meaning of things happening should be in those terms. I tried to be happy for them; I went to go see Nefertiti at the Egyptian museum and they called well towards evening.

Lenka announced over dinner that she was staying in Berlin for a few days. The flight had been very cheap anyway; and she could get another flight, or a bus, or a train, whenever she liked. She had decided that Berlin simply couldn't be seen in two days.

Not if you get up at five, I said. They both laughed. They were automatically sitting on the same side of the table, and somehow I was feeling judged.

I could get a couple of days off work, I suppose, I said.

No; don't take time off work for me, said Pato. *You've already cheered me up a great deal.*

I was surprised that they had retained those little artifices. Were there still things one couldn't speak about? I suppose. People still can't say, *thank you for bringing me someone to sleep with.* We aren't quite there yet.

Look at the time, said Lenka, when the time came. We went back to the apartment and I shouldered my little bag and I said, *it's not far to the subway and I can get the connection to the airport so don't worry about me.*

It's been so nice to have you, said Pato, so nice of you to come.

Thank you, said Lenka, *this was a great idea.*

And they really didn't even see me off, not even to the subway. Too busy, I guess.

-Josh Stenberg

[A Percolating Quarry]

I.

Crumpled throws of cursorily
Discarded clothing—strewn. A
Small mountain of electric blue
Panty lay heaped among a docile
Sock and deviant bra, contouring
The shapes we made on that floor.

Ants climb methodically that
Cerulean massif crotch-land
Where cotton catches swathes
Of buttery discharge.

II.

A collective umber braid writhes
Open lace-loops — brown on blue:
Hunger.
Perhaps,
That sapphire knit will be colonized.

They had devoured daffodils—rendering
Almost invisible petal-holes—inducing
A fast death and stink. Yet, flourishes
Hummed—those blooms were in motion,
And decorative flora sustained ant-life.

III.

Un-winged workers: sterile, females
—Caste-bound women— are nurse-
Maids and soldiers relegated to the
Realms of heavy lifting and nurturing.

This undulating branch of ants mines
Panties for the insatiable delights of
My white velveteen pheromones.

- Christine Davids

Jesus says.

What cheek
The boy has
To go
Before the judge
Behind the bench
All night long
We lay together
In green fields
Each soldier died
In vain
I cried out
For a little help
I'd trade a kingdom
For a horse
I'd trade my soul
For a way out of here
Back to somewhere
Where everything is clear.

- Ira Allen

E-Mail is My Chamomile Tea But Also My No Doz

If you asked me whether I was more addicted to caffeine or the internet, I'd humbly confess it to be the latter. A week now without coffee, though black tea and energy drinks have found their way quietly into my days: nothing purposeful, no caffeine withdrawal avoidance or plan to reduce my coffee/caffeine dependence, and so I conclude coffee is not that important a ritual or substance as I'd conceived.

Or maybe the same way that I realize I long for a break from technology, to be liberated from the expectation of checking e-mails, Facebook, texts, I long for this severance from a reliance on all substances that energize me. Maybe Facebook has become my caffeine, e-mail is my chamomile tea but also my No Doz, and texts are my snacks – and together they all fortify me, sustain me, ground me, give me form and identity. More than my breakfast cereal or coffee, I crave, I need, I relish in waking up and virtually saying hello to the world. I've disavowed Twitter, admittedly because I may become addicted, but from Facebook I draw lifeblood, sickly, generally unfulfilling substance though it is. Would I wither without the reassuring glare of the computer screen, do I need constant virtual affirmation? I am oversaturated, full but discomfited because I'm not truly satiated, not nearly so, yet sleepy on chamomile, and the glare has tired my eyes. I must think. Escape is no solution, but perhaps abandonment, departure, even a simple trial separation will do me good.

- Rachel Carbonell

At The Transportation Museum of Literature

We broke in, intending to just look around
but, as the poet says, beer leads on to beer,
so, after trying for a while to hotwire
the replica of Kerouac and Cassidy's car,
we declaimed Shakespeare on the section of raft
salvaged from a Louisiana scrapyard,
then tagged our names across the carriage
from some Austen novel and the ass
of the Trojan horse, and in the morning,
after waking in the coffin from the Pequod
we crawled back outside, and soon discovered
we were embarrassed now to have to walk,
like a Joad, we, who had held the Argo's wheel
and opened the throttle of the Wabash Cannonball.

- Joe Mills

Untitled



Jennifer Yung

The Fisherman

The man in the suit unscrewed the lid from the bottle and cast it absently into the water. Between his feet sat a large canvas sports bag that looked like it had seen better days. In his lap was a letter. He turned it over and over in his hands, the implications of what he was preparing himself to do swaying back and forth in his mind, mimicking the motion of the boat as the waves passed underneath it.

He had set up his rod - more through habit than the intention of actually fishing - and it lay forgotten between the stirrups where the oars would have resided, had he not thrown them into the water an hour ago.

He had always enjoyed being out here; he found the stillness of the water a welcome respite from the day-to-day trivialities of the world.

It seemed right that he should do it here.

He pressed the bottle to his lips and sucked down its bitter-sweet essence with a melancholy enthusiasm, like a child taking his medicine at the insistence of his unyielding parents.

I'll make you a deal, he told himself.

If the line goes, I'll stay; if not, well...

He waved an arm over the ocean and let his fingers glide through the water, as if the gesture explained everything.

Then he waited.

- Richard Lee Langridge

The Night Priest

My bed stands
at the end of a black hallway.
Night so dark it has volume,
broken only by the slats of sunlight
streaked though windows.
Windows which are not there.

At the end, sighing, opposing me, he stands
his cassock a formless extension of the dark,
buttons glitter like a row of eyes.
The band at his throat is crimson, gold
shimmers in its mangled cross,
and arms are bent low as a wilted flower.
His face is void;
he smiles through the slit under his chin.
Gravel stones are sunk deep in each socket of his face

He turns to lumber further down the hall,
the heels of his shoes echo, as if knocking marbles.
The choir screams and leap from the rafters,
bats, madmen, clothed in rags.

- Scarlett Hackney

Journey

That lingering memory while
Listening to a song
Travelling by the train and the subconscious.

Reminds me of that unexplainable feeling
When one has outgrown the teens
But insists like a kid to stay back...
To stay back in that time and space.

The feel of snow-clad mountains
That rush of adrenaline
Coupled with the melody of emotion
Unspoken and unheard...

Love that has not flowered yet
But is in the embryonic form
Which may be delivered
Lest aborted by contraceptives of logic and reality.

- Sakshi Chanana

"And if I was all twitch how did the twitch which was me know that the twitch was all?"

- *All the King's Men*

"See!" the young woman on the upper deck shrieked, twirling her left hand above her flaming red hair. "See this!"

Bristow, standing on the rear platform of the vintage red double-decker bus, smiled at the woman as she flashed her engagement ring at some people waiting to cross the street. Briefly he clanged the antique trolley bell he had installed on the bus, which she acknowledged with a deep bow. Then he gripped an overhanging strap as the bus lurched around a corner, snatches of the Grateful Dead blaring from the speaker above the cab. He could hardly hear the band, though, the guests at the engagement party were so loud but he didn't mind. What was important was that everybody was having a good time because then they might charter the bus for some other event.

The louder the better, he believed, clanging the trolley bell again.

Never in his life did Russ Bristow ever imagine he would be operating a party transport service. He was a high school science teacher, had taught chemistry and physics for six years before budget cuts caused him to be laid off a year and a half ago. The prospects of finding another teaching position were dismal so, after deciding not to look for one in another district, he went to work as a salesman at his Uncle Harry's Toyota dealership. From

Twitch

a mechanic there he learned that the fifty-three-year old Routemaster bus was for sale by a winery upstate that for years used the vehicle to take visitors on tours of the vineyard. One afternoon he went to check it out with the mechanic, who was confident the engine would not require a lot of work to be reliable out on the street, so he made an offer and it was accepted.

"Are you sure buying this was a good idea?" his uncle asked after he drove the vehicle back to the dealership where the mechanic could work on it in his spare time.

"I hope so."

"It better be, Russ, or else you're the owner of the biggest crackerjack prize in town."

His idea was to convert the double-decker into a charter and earn some money by leasing it out as a party vehicle. Often, when he was a teacher, he was required to chaperone various activities sponsored by his school and he was always amazed by the number of students who chartered vehicles to ferry them to the events. So he knew there was definitely a market for such a business and thought a double-decker would offer an attractive alternative to the usual minivans and stretch limos and yellow school buses. He hoped, too, to attract an older clientele, eager to celebrate anniversaries and retirements and birthdays with a stress-free ride around town.

Not surprisingly, business was pretty slow at first but once prom season got under way he got more bookings than he could fill. And business continued to be strong during the summer, and though it declined a little in the fall, it

started to pick up as the holidays approached. However, seldom was the bus chartered during the week so he could not afford to quit his job at his uncle's dealership. He was not disappointed, though, because he never expected to earn a living as a charter bus operator. Far more important to him than making money was the opportunity to be around a lot of people enjoying themselves. That was the real pleasure he got out of operating the party bus. Often, as he welcomed aboard guests in his conductor's jacket and cap, he pretended he was a guest too and thought of the other passengers as close friends he had just met.

"You be the judge," one of the women at the engagement party bellowed at Bristow.

Startled, he looked over at the woman who was so intoxicated she had to cling to a pole to maintain her balance. "Judge of what?"

"Which of us is the best kisser."

He blushed. "Oh, I'm sure you're all very good."

"No, no," she stammered. "We want to find out who's the best."

The woman next to her then loosened the knot of the necktie of the guy in front of her and pulled it off and handed it to Bristow. "Put this over your eyes and each of us will plant a wet one on you and you can tell us then who's the best kisser."

"I don't know if I'll be able to."

"You're a man, aren't you, conductor?" another woman on the lower deck laughed. "You can tell I'm sure."

Quickly and firmly he wrapped the

crimson necktie over his eyes, took a deep breath, and braced himself beside the fire extinguisher. Then, one by one, the women took his face in their hands and kissed him, some more intensely than others, and inevitably he imagined they were really interested in him.

Bristow never had a lot of friends, even as a youngster, so he was accustomed to being alone. But after he lost his teaching position he felt more alone than ever, as if he had done something to deserve his release. He was devastated, absolutely devastated. Some days he never left his apartment, hardly ever left his living room, just sat on the couch and sipped screwdrivers and stared at whatever was showing on television. He was embarrassed to look at other tenants in his building, didn't want to see the disapproval in their eyes. He was sure they blamed him for losing his job.

At moments, it almost seemed as if he were suffering from some kind of chronic disease, he felt so listless and apathetic, and would go back to bed and just lay there, aware only of the slight twitch above his left eye that had been with him since he was a small boy. It was all that seemed awake in him those moments, all that made him know he was not asleep.

Just before he left his apartment, Bristow glanced at himself in the hallway mirror to make sure his saucer cap was on straight. It was but his tie was a little askew and he straightened it then

buttoned the top button of his dark blue serge jacket. He smiled. All he lacked was a ticket machine, he thought, otherwise he was confident he could have passed for a conductor on a double-decker when they still were prevalent in London.

"Hello there," his landlady, Mrs. Simmons, said as he walked past the laundry room.

"Hello."

She stared at his cap. "I see you're taking out your bus tonight."

"I am."

"Who have you got aboard tonight?"

"A couple from the west side who are celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary."

She crinkled her eyes. "My, I didn't know folks made such a fuss over ten years. I've heard of silver and golden wedding anniversaries being celebrated in a special way but never ten years."

"I guess that's considered quite an achievement these days."

"I guess so."

Nodding, he stepped past the inquisitive woman, amazed how relaxed he was speaking with her when only a few months ago he was reluctant even to make eye contact with her because he was so embarrassed about his predicament then. Strangely, when he wore his conductor's outfit, he felt almost as sure of himself as he did in front of a roomful of students. His shoulders were erect, his head held high, his eyes directed at whomever he was addressing. He was even tempted, now and again, to wear it when he wasn't aboard the bus because it gave him so much confidence.

His uncle allowed him to park the bus inside one of his gated lots and, after stopping at a convenience store to

buy some breath mints, he drove there and found his driver waiting for him outside the locked gate. Pervis was also the mechanic who had worked on the engine.

"Ready to make some money tonight?"

"Always ready to do that, Russ."

"Let's get rolling then," he said, snapping his fingers.

Soon they were on their way to Bridgeport Square, the pick-up point for the group riding the bus this evening. A couple of dozen people were scheduled for the excursion, including the pastor who married the celebrants ten years ago, but he would not be surprised if a few more than that came aboard. That often happened despite the assurances of the person booking the bus that the guest list was firm. He wasn't really concerned, though, so long as the number of riders didn't exceed sixty-four, because he didn't have to worry about providing any provisions for them. A bar was set up on the lower deck but it was up to the passengers to provide refreshments. All he offered was a huge kettle of macadamia nuts.

At eight o'clock sharp the bus swung into the square and Bristow stood on the platform and announced, "All aboard!" To his surprise, the guests boarded the bus so quickly he did not have to make the announcement a second time which, he figured, was an indication that everything would go pretty smoothly tonight. Certainly things couldn't be as bad as the bachelorette party last weekend when three passengers got so drunk they got sick on several seats on the upper deck. It took him and Pervis a good two hours to clean up the mess later that night at the car lot.

The first month of service he

frequently interrupted the music blaring from the loudspeaker to point out assorted sights along the route but gradually he learned that most of the passengers were not interested in his observations so, for the most part, he kept quiet. However, when asked, he gladly posed for pictures, smiling so hard sometimes he thought his face was going to split, and also let passengers take turns clanging the trolley bell when the bus approached a busy intersection. He genuinely looked forward to every outing, even though the route the bus took was almost always the same, because he felt attached somehow to the other passengers. He was the conductor to be sure but he also believed he was a guest too, someone invited along with all the others to enjoy one another's company during the excursion.

"You know what you look like?" a tipsy woman in a lemon-colored dress asked him about an hour into the ride.

"A conductor, I hope."

Slowly she shook the ringlets of her chaotic hair. "You look like a penguin."

He smiled. "Well, I've never been told that before."

"Well, now you have, mister conductor."

As expected, the guests aboard the bus tonight were not half as boisterous as the bachelorettes last weekend but many of them did sing along with the Rolling Stones when some of their songs blared through the loudspeaker. A few couples even danced on the upper deck, waving their plastic glasses of champagne above their heads. Everyone seemed to be having an enjoyable time, he believed, everyone that

is except a slight woman with frosted hair as bright as whipping cream. A squash-faced man whose shirttails were hanging beneath his sports jacket was pressed against her in a corner right below the trolley bell. She appeared to be trying to squirm past him but he wouldn't let her budge. His arms were draped like clamps across her shoulders.

At once, Bristow made his way over to them, nudging past the other guests who seemed oblivious to the woman's plight. "Is everything all right here?" he asked after he stepped beside the disheveled man.

The guy ignored him, awkwardly stroking a thumb across the anxious woman's left cheek.

Bluntly he tapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't touch me, pal."

"Why don't you leave the lady alone?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"What goes on aboard this bus is my business."

"The hell it is."

"Please, sir, step back."

Angrily the guy then spun around and took a wild swing at Bristow who was able to block it with his left arm.

"Now you're going to have to leave," he said, after pressing his arm against the inebriated man's chest.

"Says who?"

"I do," he bellowed. "I'm the conductor."

He then pressed a button to signal Pervis to stop the bus and he did almost at once, pulling over to the curb in the middle of the block, and Bristow escorted the belligerent passenger off the vehicle.

"Thank you for your help," the woman said, after he got back on board. "That guy was all up against me and I'd never set eyes on him until tonight."

"I'm sorry when something like that happens but all you can do is put a stop to it as quickly as possible."

She touched his elbow. "If you hadn't stepped in when you did, I don't know what I would've done. Scream, I guess."

"That might've scared him away."

"I don't know. He was pretty persistent. But, thank God, I didn't have to because of you. You were my knight tonight."

Shyly he lowered his head, embarrassed by her remark, then invited her to clang the trolley bell as the bus rattled past an illuminated fountain.

A couple of days later, after he got off work, he walked over to the Armenian lounge around the corner from the dealership. He seldom went there, usually only when his uncle offered to buy him a drink after making a sale, but today he went alone and sat at the end of the bar where someone had left a wrinkled copy of the morning paper. Ever since the incident the other evening, when he ordered that drunk off the bus, he

wondered if he would have intervened if he wasn't wearing his uniform. It provided him with the illusion of authority, as if he really were acting under the color of law. He didn't know so he decided to go to the lounge to see if another opportunity to intervene might occur, still not sure if he would get involved without the security of his uniform. He was there for an hour and a half but nothing out of the ordinary happened so he returned the next evening and again nothing eventful occurred.

Some day something would, he was sure, and he intended to be there when it did and see if he would assert himself as he did when he was aboard his bus.

-Thomas Healy

Citrus



THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE

Maybe time can do
all the things that physicists say
time can do.

At the café in Greece you
are ordering orange juice,
the barista is riding on his scooter
and coming back with
a box of oranges,
and the owner, a more patient man,
is finishing his cigarette and going
out back to plant a tree.

- William Winfield Wright

Illuminations

We sit on the back porch,
Surrounded by the desert landscape.
An ocean of tans and browns.
Past the clearing
and then the shrubs
and then the scattered Joshua trees,
I can see nothing.

For miles and miles, there is
only dirt and rattle snakes.
The freezing cold of night comes.
The night that takes our animals.
The bird does not make it though
and the cat disappears.

You tell stories of the universe.
The night sky, illuminated
at seeming random, holds the key, you say.
When we look up there, we look at the past.
What we see is no longer there.

How can this be? I ask.
The light of the stars takes so long
to travel to your eyes,
by the time it gets there,
it has already died, maybe.

Are they already gone? I ask.
You insist that the answer
Is simply "maybe."

How is it that something
So clear in my mind
So bright, so real
Is not real at all?

You explain,
Much of our lives
Is only what we see

And still,
I see desert landscape
I see the porch.
They have already gone?
Sometimes I cannot tell.
Maybe.

- Leena Fitzgerald

Untitled

The Rainbow Room; Kiwi Martini
 already a part of the past,
 on top of a platinum end-table.
 There was no allowing herself
 to notice the rim, where the lip
 gloss smeared, the shade
 labeled Divinity

and don't count on there being calluses
 concealed beneath goat-cashmere loafers...
 no matter how admiring her twisting body is
 when she pivots, constantly, the soul
 won't be worn down.
 Her clean tongue; imagine massaging it.
 Dance: sensual frenetic portraiture

of what
 she can't give
 and she doesn't believe in you,
 or angels and Jesus.
 So it's okay to perforate
 that tumid heart of yours,
 and hope that she swallows
 the bile in her throat.
 Then curse her father for not teaching
 her how to love herself.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

And please allow her to curl together
 in your lap. Weave her fingers
 with your hair to grip gently and tilt
 your head sideways, almost breathe
 steam in you

saying "I love it when
 you kiss my hand."

- David Angelino

NO HANDS

Can you tie a cherry stem with your tongue,
he asks, mistaking me
as the type who impresses
with maraschino flavored twists and curls,
parts her lips in passive delight
and juices wet knots
birthed through pinched teeth,
like it takes talent.

He slips one from his Shirley Temple.
I was being conservative
when I brought it over from the bar.
I pull off the stem,
it slithers to find muscles,
curls the wrong way,
constricts, then lies flat.
I cover my mouth with my hand,
embarrassed by the awkward
fist fight of my tongue
doing failed pushups.

Don't cover your mouth,
he chastises, as though I'm cheating,
like I don't know that he just wants to watch.
My lips press and purse,
he's hypnotized by the struggle.

I give up and lay the remnants on the table,
dormant stem, straight as an arrow.
He picks it up,
opens his mouth, swirls it around,
and produces one crushed
knot.

That was just in my mouth, I warn.
I know, he says,
then hands it to me,
and winks.

- Jennifer Donnell

Airport Calls

You check the calendar again and pretend to act surprised. It's April already, the season he heads north for his other life. All the things people look forward to this time of year only distresses you. Budding trees, lustrous fauna, and the hopeful anticipation that usually accompanies spring, is old hat. Been there, done that, didn't pan out. That calendar is nothing more than a monthly announcement by which you chart your foolishness.

Evenings of intimate farewells gave way long ago to the sound of coins dropping every few minutes into a public phone at the departure terminal. You hang onto every word he shouts at you above the background noise. *See you after the Woodbine meet is over. I've left some money for you with so-and-so in case you find yourself short. Be well.*

Air Canada beckons him. You're choking on the truth that he needs to hear, but the operator interrupts and asks for an additional fifty cents. Forget it; he's already bolted to the luggage check-in. How remarkably fast he moves when necessary. Even the telephone conversations are on his terms.

You could write your own

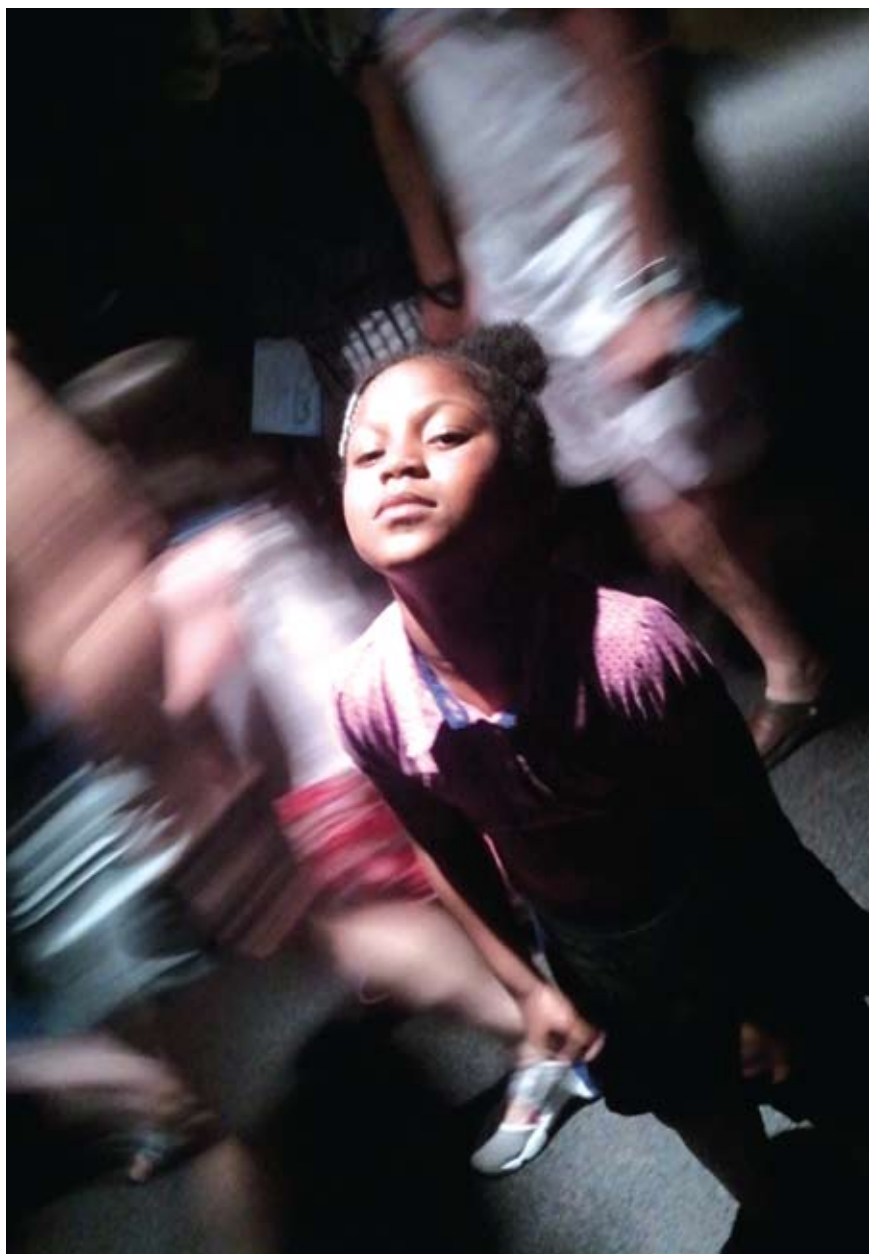
ticket with me. You were stunned, though flattered, by that line he sprung on you the first week. You kept him at arm's length until he wore you down and won the game. Your cherished grand ideals nose-dived when an easier way loomed and you got that top-dog title in the end. Write your own ticket, my ass.

You check the calendar again. It's June now and the May call never came. An eloquent recording announces the number you have just dialed has been changed, no further information is available. Well, old girl, what did you expect?

Between the anger and deprecating introspection, you still manage to justify a decade of waste. He is considerate; at least he made sure so-and-so keeps you supplied with a stack of Diazepam scripts.

As the yellow pills work their magic, that disquiet in your head begins to ease and you realize Anne Sexton was right...*you are a watercolor, you wash off.*

- M.E. Mitchell



In this World

Tanya Lipscomb

Fast

When the sun touched our wooden fence the sky flared an irradiated red. My mother said she was tired of squinting through slanted wet light, made me sift through the cobwebbed recesses of our utility closet for each dusty bulb. They creaked into brass spirals. Some rattled, had to be thrown away. She asked me to arrange the lamps like dolls on the couch. I settled a camping lantern into an armchair and folded a wool blanket over it. I leaned one flashlight against another's handle, adjusted the lenses so they could face each other. While my mother was in the kitchen, I watched in amazement as dust rained to the ceiling.

My mother leaned to examine her ghostly reflection in the window, shook her head to untangle the gleam of bell-shaped earrings from her hair.

The ground beef stench of chili perforated the first floor. My mother's lover was seventeen and had a platinum blonde ponytail. Crumbles of lipstick remained on his cheek since he'd helped with my math homework. He slipped a hand into a copper-threaded oven mitt to sync its silent bark with the neighbor's dog. My mother ran her wrinkled fingertips under the faucet. A key slid into the lock of the front door, the announcement of my father's arrival. My mother wrestled the mitt from the ponytailed boy. He whimpered. She slapped his butt, bade him to follow the last splashes of daylight over our fence and, most importantly, out of my father's sight.

My father had a habit of taking the seat between us and enduring our silence. But on this night we heard him

stomp up the stairs. His steps creaked. A closet door opened. Hangers slid across metal beams. A door closed. More creaks. The shower brayed. My mother dropped a plate in the sink, where it exploded into sandy particles the shape of a starfish. Water pumped through black-leaded pipes beneath our feet. Ninety minutes passed. At first the chili chugged steam, then it glazed over. An epidermis formed when we weren't looking.

With a great and terrible groan my father lumbered downstairs. The heavy thud of his footfalls navigated the dangers of plastic trucks and toy soldiers I kept on the steps so he would yell at me to move them. That was our most reliable form of contact in these antediluvian years.

I met him at the landing. We had questions. My mother would want to know why he was late and why he showered after work when he normally didn't bathe until morning. Once he tried to coach me. This is the proper form for striking a soccer ball, he said, and missed. His sneaker squeaked over the ball's glossy surface, which propelled him higher than my mother believed was possible. Because of the sound he made when he landed on his head, he had to wear a neck brace for two weeks. The man walked like a gorilla when he was in a hurry but never sweat, which led my mother to have me ask: did he need to wash off the odor of another woman? I could muster the appropriate indignation, she told me, it has to be you.

My father dragged a duffle bag one-handed, trampled the trucks on the steps, knocked the pogo stick I had

leaned against the wall four months before. It sprung downhill and crashed at the landing, grazed my cheek. His silhouette filled the dome of a light we positioned from the upstairs bathroom. Tiny plastic pieces of a game we used to play on Saturday nights rained down the steps. Clothes my mother folded for me earlier in the week caught in the tiny black wheels and trailed my father's bag before twisting into the shape of snakes.

My mother stood behind me and crossed her arms. She said: So.

My father kept his eyes down as if in search of something. He appeared surprised when he had to stop because I was in the way. A rough hand massaged my shoulder bone. The duffle bag flopped onto the floor. Dusty air compressed out of the partially open zipper.

He said: Son, son, son. You may not believe it but at two in the morning, every morning, for the last nine years? I wake up in a panic. I go into the bathroom and pace in the shower. I pack this bag, this big bag you see right here? Then. Know what Daddy does? Daddy has a heart attack. First his arm—you listening? Your daddy gets dragged down a dark corridor. He dies. That's what he thinks, but. A part of him? Does die. Enough for him to unpack. Enough to convince himself it'll be better in the morning.

My mother said: I thought you had a bad bladder.

My father said: That was a lie, honey.

I said: You did this every night?

He said: Yes, Son.

I said: Even when we went on

summer vacations?

My father said: I'm afraid so, Son.

The vibration from my mother's tapping crawled up my shins. She said: Go ahead, dear. Scar the child. Why are you so dramatic? Now he's going to think everything about his life until now was a lie. All his happy memories? Pissed on.

My father said: He can hear you.

The light bulb in my rhinoceros flashlight flickered before it extinguished, left a vapor of shadow over my mother's shoulder. She said: He'll distrust us well into his thirties. He'll think marriage is a sham and be awkward. He'll be a virgin until he's twenty and have to lie about it. Oh dear. What if he thinks about this conversation—my voice—every time he's intimate with the few women he'll attract?

My father said: He's standing in front of you.

I looked up and craned my head to see her face upside down. Her lips were uneven and her eyes had grown dark. I said: I'm here, Mom. See?

My mother ran her fingers through my hair and said: Don't take your father's side, dear. He's leaving us because apparently, we're awful.

In the kitchen the refrigerator clicked on. The chili now smelled like cat food.

My father said: Not to interrupt your little diatribe you got going here, but haven't I been the one to say the boy needs a skill?

My mother said: Why we're awful is the question. Must be because we want meals together after he comes home from work and to share a glass of wine and maybe, maybe have some

physical contact but the truth is I bare my behind to your father every night and know what he does?

My father said: You asked me to bring it up. I'm bringing it up.

My mother said: Me personally? I try to fulfill my vows. He says, "Must. Sleep." That's all you care about. Like a half hour's going to kill you? And lest we forget: if you spent less time packing you'd feel more rested in the morning, I promise you. That's what I tell our Little One.

My father said: I'm not talking about sex with you.

My mother's fingers tightened around my hair and pulled until my eyes watered. She said: Your father's right, honey. Know-it-all's are always right, aren't they? Well. Aren't they? You need to cultivate a talent. Like we talked about? Remember when you told me about that boy Chuck in your class? He can huck the ball and spit the farthest, can pound his knuckles on your forehead and the bus driver can't see because he's stuffed you under the seat? Girls like boys who are strong. That's why if you're not the best looking boy, and you're small for your age? Take me, for example. Your father's made me take a lover. If you're not the prettiest dandelion head, nobody's going to pluck your flower, honey.

My father's eyes reddened. He said: The hell? That's a girl's metaphor.

I craned my head and said: You're talking about the boy who cleans pools but not ours because we don't have one?

My mother said: Yes, dear.

I said: Chuck says why don't we

have a pool. I told him I don't know why we don't have a pool. Chuck says why's his brother always over if we don't have a pool. Teacher says mosquitoes are attracted to pools and they carry diseases in their bodies and for you to call his house on the weekend if you want him to come over and spray.

She scratched the back of my head, cooed and said: Good flowers pay attention in school.

My father said: I've been trying to tell you I'm a man. And for the last time, he's a boy. I'm a man, he's a boy, and that's all there is to it.

I stopped burrowing my head into my mother's belly and jacked my thumb to my chest. I said: Boy.

My father said: All I ever wanted was to keep myself mobile. Think I wanted a house? Think I wanted a job?

My mother said: Don't you imply our child is a prison any more than our marriage is.

Somebody honked from what sounded like the driveway.

My father said: I never wanted anything I couldn't fit into a backpack. Any idea what it costs me to use this monstrosity of a duffle bag?

My mother said: Don't you remember the miscarriages, the other boys and girls we flushed down the toilet before we got this one, this magical, miracle boy here?

She stretched my ears from my head until they became hot, turned my head like I was a steering wheel.

I said: Why'd you flush my brothers and sisters?

My father said: They were

disgusting, honey. You wouldn't have wanted them to play with. They were pink and didn't have skin. Though sometimes they had a partially formed nose or elbow.

My mother said: Why did you marry me if you wanted to live in the woods with other boys like Peter Pan?

My father ran his fingers through his hair and said: This shit again? I never said I wanted to live in the woods with other boys or anything else you're insinuating. One time a guy reached into my pants when I was, gee whiz, Son, about your age. But that was it. Thirty-four years on this planet and one time, one guy reached into my pants. Big deal. It wasn't like I needed counseling or anything and I'd like to thank you for divulging personal information I told you in confidence.

I felt my mother's sweat form on her palms, brand my collar bones.

She said: I was a skater. Sometimes I was a fairy or a princess. Or a tree. You think I have the figure to do that now? You think I still say to myself, "I wish I could be a princess?"

My father said: I recognize you're oversimplifying, honey. How many times have I said nobody notices if you have scars anymore? You can get scars from gaining weight too fast these days.

My mother said: You used me, dear, and now look at my legs. I'm sure you've noticed. That's why you sleep so far away. Their size always surprises me but I could lift myself off the ground once. And you want to know something else? Whenever I blew you, your ass stank.

My father said: Jesus.

My mother said: What a relief it is too—I liked giving blowjobs as a kid. But for you? I mean, nobody taught me how to wipe. I bring it up only because the boy seems to have your level of attention to detail. And, maybe? You might want to have a conversation about it later?

My father said: This isn't about sex.

My mother said: This isn't about boyhood fantasies either.

My mother disappeared upstairs with a bottle of cabernet sauvignon. My father knocked on the forehead of the rhinoceros flashlight. He ran his fingers over the sputtering light. He seemed to forget I stood in the same place, inhaled when he saw me again. What came tumbling from his mouth was vague: a boy needs to know how to work electrical, something about next time he'd show me how to fix the flashlight. The spring of the door rattled between us. I picked up the rest of the things on the stairs. Some of my possessions, which I'd laid out for nine years before I learned to be tidy, had been dragged through the foyer and outside where a taxi idled, where red lights recorded in cash the time my parents spent bickering. Its tires cut through the drizzle. Craned over the blurry window was the driver's spotted hand and a cigarette that fed blue smoke into the hum of twilight.

- Brendon Vayo

The Age of the Dinosaurs

When he wakes and walks outside his door, dinosaur.
There's no sandbox but a sidewalk and stairs are steppes
littered with the extruded corpses of the day before.
He swings out from the specific silences of his parents
and drops into the cretaceous anger of his Allosaur.

Not numb but a thunder lizard, hunting the boy at dawn,
nuzzling muzzle as gentle as violence against him, each tooth
a prayer-press longer than palms offered to him in a fetid yawn.
This is a puppy moment they share, tusseled and true,
monster and child screaming in bloody romps on the lawn.

- Anthony Rintala

Kettle Moraine

The wall of white water rushed
incrementally, at the future's pace,
across what will be Wisconsin.
It worried the land, not in torrents
but, like a scab scratched, scarring slowly
leaving behind an endless gnarled contour.
Where once stood a wave of milk glass,
there now is a cenotaph, a home
that I will never live in, nor die.

It seems so much effort, so much
of the world torn to flinders
by the grind of time and ice on rock
for so personal a disappointment to linger.

- Anthony Rintala

IN ALL MY MOTHER'S EARLY FILMS

She only smokes when she's the sainted heroine,
Carry Nation, Joan of Arc, Rembrandt's first wife,
and they always cut those scenes out.
After long days on the ice floes,
she and Mary Pickford would drive to San Diego
and call to sailors out hotel windows.
When wardrobe first put her and Rosaline Russell
into nuns' habits and then aprons,
they both got dead drunk for a week.
The poster of her and Greta Garbo
from "The Two Profiles" sells for thousands now.

"I don't do Westerns," was the last thing
she ever said in Hollywood.
She never lived in Beverly Hills,
never answered the door in her sunglasses.
Everything after that was Super 8 and in backyards.
She's bending down for the hands of a clumsy toddler.
She's in a stand-up pool and a bathing cap,
at the barbeque grill or the birthday party
behind the candles. Smiling.

And then there's that moment,
as in all of her films,
when she's alone in a medium shot,
having just left a building and about to walk
away while the camera stays where it is,
and already she's sure of the light,
maybe buttoning her coat or putting on a scarf,
and even as she moves she looks
down at her hands
and then up to the nearest horizon.

- William Winfield Wright

A Fifty-Piece Jigsaw Puzzle

She tapped the egg against the counter. Lightly. Then harder. Crack. The pan sizzled as a perfectly intact yolk made its presence felt.

"I don't want to eat an egg!" I said again.

She just shook her head and concentrated on the egg. A sunny side up.

"I mean it," I said.

She turned around to look at me and raised her eyebrows. So what? they seemed to mock.

It was going to be one of those mornings. I was the first to look away. She placed the egg in front of me and took her seat across the table.

"I don't want..."

"I'm doing this for your own good. Eat!" She said and poured herself a cup of tea with steady hands.

My hands weren't quite so steady as I picked up the fork. The egg's sunny face seemed to be laughing at me. I stabbed at it with the fork and felt a strange satisfaction in breaking the yolk. It no longer smiled as yellow rivulets ran down the white surrounding. It cried.

The satisfaction was fleeting

when I saw her looking at me with a stern expression on her face. She was waiting.

I speared a piece of the white part and placed it in my mouth and started chewing.

Slowly. She continued observing me as I took my time cutting up the egg in plenty tiny bite size pieces. A fifty-piece jigsaw puzzle. I continued chewing although I had long swallowed that first bite. She raised one eyebrow this time and I made a face. I placed another bite in my mouth and leaned back against the chair to start another round of chewing. This time I'll try for at least three minutes. I began a silent count of seconds

1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13, 14,15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 ...

Her face broke into a smile. Then she laughed. A rumbling sound that started somewhere in her stomach region and traveled all the way up until it erupted from her mouth.

Volcanic. Beautiful. My mother.

- Rabia Shahzad

Half-Tone Dream

I am the girl in the photograph frame. You know, when you buy the stylish but discount frame from one of the upper-end department stores, there's a half-tone, maybe sepia, image of someone young and sophisticated enjoying herself. That's me. I am there in the summer dress, hair blown by erratic coastal winds, one eye obscured by errant locks, smiling coyly. I am perpetually in love and you hate me for that. I have the boyfriend. The dark-haired boyfriend with the convertible. We wash it together and spray each other playfully with the hose.

What do you suppose the frame people expect of me? What role am I to play? Do they in some way try to match models to frames, as you, a consumer, might do? Do frame-industry-insiders have names for their frames - "summer romance" or "heartbreak" - and seek an appropriate image to fill it? Do you, the picture taking public, live up to it? Or do I get replaced with whatever mismatched photo you have - snapshots of grandchildren, with graduation photos, with pets or family reunions.

I really am best for young love. My best asset is envy. Young man meets a pretty thing in college. There is a pivotal event - a dance, a first time he saw her all dolled up, a summer drive to some utopian place - now he believes this is the

beginning of something wonderful. Something immense and poetic. He sees me. Sees the invigorating smile. Sees the dress fluttering in the wind. Sees the blurred edenic background and he reads a code of bliss. Love as something mythic. He thinks he's living it. He thinks he's found something special, so I am the frame for him. For her. For them.

But we all know how love goes. Perhaps he will say or do something awkward and unappealing and the whole relationship will corrode, maybe after weeks or months of spats, or artificial friendliness, or complaining about each other to friends on the side. Even if it doesn't go that way, there's the point of ultra-familiarity. When the magic is gone. When they're in a diner and he knows she is going to order the denver omelet, not because she is so predictable and always orders the Denver omelet, but because he's come to the point where he can "read" her so well. To some that is the essence of love. Okay, true. But there is also that realization that there is nothing left to learn. The mystery is gone. You have comfort, but what about mystery? And if he kept my picture from the frame, he is going to be reminded of what he once had. If he pulls her out, and finds that I was left between the snapshot of her in the sunglasses and the green

dress, yes that green dress – if between that and the cardboard back, he finds me, if that happens, then he'll be reminded of what he lost. He'll be reminded that he once thought he could photograph the wind with the right F-stop and beautiful russet hair.

Maybe my purpose is to re-affirm your cynicism. To prevent you from expecting too much from love in the first place. If approached correctly, I will reassert your doubt in love at first sight. I know how you think about that bike courier who pedals past your office window six times a day, or the girl at the sandwich counter. There is something about his or her look that makes you think "marriage" - eternal bliss. You know it. No need to get to know him/her. That's a half-tone dream. Look at me and see how silly that dream really is. Know how fictitious it is. Hate me because I can live that life you can only pine for.

- Martin Brick



- Jennifer Yung

Folds IV

Abilify

I look inside the bottle,
I try to find my dose.

But as I grasp it in my hand,
The Darkness begins its show.

He sees his way around the Dark,
But now his vision goes.

He musters his grit, He tries with pain
To keep himself composed.

But as He grabs the knotted rope,
His fear begins to grow.

Till finally He's hung above the ground,
Left swaying with the crows.

And as the Darkness fades away,
I finally take my pill.

But as I look into the mirror
It's now so very clear,

That the burns upon my neck,
Will never disappear.

- Bermuda

Moth Eater

When the Thai floor cushion I've had for four years
is chewed to bits overnight,
I know the dog misses you.

I miss you on behalf of the dog.

She stares out the window,
longs for you, I assume,
until I notice she is after a moth,
has squished it in the track.

It's half dead,
she waits for final movements,
every flutter gets her paw.
She bites the dead body then spits it out,
realizing she has higher standards.

At least one of us is good at letting go.

- Jennifer Donnell

[Fire Blight]

Felled limbs, limbs felled
Like those in groves of
Infected navels or other impotent
Trunks and appendages of
Disease-gravid fruit trees.

Fruit flowers in swelling abdomens
And shrinking bodies—in unassuming
bellies. She explained — it's
“No smaller than a clementine.”

Botanical ovaries and citrus
Membranes adorn her insides.
The opulence of fleshy edibles
Sign not virility, but instead
Furtive sub-bark pathologies.

Cancer's crab is not just a constellation;
Clementines are not just toy mandarins.

- Christine Davids

Vodka and Underwear

Just hours before her wedding she thinks about how people make trades. It might well be the first time in her life that she's given "exchange" any thought, because she doesn't think of herself as the type to value material things. Yet she does. Probably more than many other people. It depends on how you define "value." Case in point: college roommate. Generally a great chick, easy to get along with, but every once in a while a little uptight. Once she completely blew up at Kimberly for eating a stupid can of tuna. But it was the end of the semester and the roommate's loans were gone and money was tight. But Kimberly maintained that she would completely let the roommate eat any of her food. Kimberly had, in fact done some very generous things for the roommate. A month earlier, when Kimberly had birthday money, she bought a bottle of the really good vodka and offered some to the roommate, who declined saying she was perfectly fine with her wine-cooler. Kimberly had to practically beg her roommate to have some, because it was really good and she simply wanted her roommate to be happy. She didn't care if it cost \$34 a bottle. And it was only then on her wedding day that Kimberly realized that what bothered her roommate about the tuna wasn't money, but in how she valued things. It's based strictly on the moment. Kimberly was hungry - she ate the tuna. Kimberly wanted her roommate to be happy - she offered the vodka. She's always spontaneous, which makes it impossible to be generous. True generosity stems from thought.

This dawns on Kimberly as she stands in her pretty underwear, admiring herself in the mirror. It strikes her that she does not *have* to wear pretty underwear. She *wants* to, understand? She really does like

the bustier and the garters. All the straps and boning and lace really make her feel like a princess. But she considers that she is *expected* to wear pretty underwear, and that her new husband will think she wore it for him. Which to some extent, she is, but it resembles the expensive vodka. She is being generous spontaneously.

It makes her think of the expectations of being married, because she does not consider herself good at living up to expectations. Boyfriends in the past have been disappointed when they've found the comfortable underwear underneath something really sexy. She'd wear it if she felt like being comfy. Other times the sexy stuff was fine. She is good at being sexy if she's in the mood. She is good at giving, only when she is in the mood. And she never thinks anything of the taking.

Seemed a little late to be having these revelations. A bridesmaid offers a shot of vodka. The expensive kind that Kimberly bought for her girls. "It's your wedding day. Drink up. Don't look so serious." She didn't really feel like drinking, but for her girls, for her husband, for everyone, she decided she would.

- Martin Brick

On Rain

Seaside town
quivering under high winds,
driving rain
in solid monsoon sheets their sound
ripping through trees,
and the wet cars driving
home or someplace else to go.

Long before was a family,
said grace before meals,
sacrificed truth
to the dining room piano,
left unmolested the honest keys.

Hundreds of miles
from the sea then,
our Father his eye on us
the Ocean her rain
pounding to escape from the conch shells.

Summers were seashells
in Maine and Cape Cod,
freezing water
fifteen minutes in twenty out,
walking for warmth
strands of mottled sand
tethered to a chill sun.

Winters were grey snow and summer far off,
the other side sunshine and sacrificial skins,
bats on a beach and some ball;
we prayed into seashells
until spring delivered—
always less than requested.

But these springs now, the rains burn through
too early too late too hard,
drowning out an unhurried Midwest,
hustling in and out the door again
like lightning crash flood flash salesmen:
leaving floorboards sodden
and not a seashell
to be seen.

We live now in the seaside towns of Kansas,
home to many seaside towns,
to rivas, gold coasts and jazz:
each wind-shrunk
battered with the jagged ends
of broken branches.

Now
when it rains,
you can leave windows open:
no wet will come in
and everything after
smells faintly
of damp.

- Ira Allen

According to My Friend the Astrologer

He does my chart every year on my birthday, and the news is never good. My planets never align fortuitously, and some days, even months, are bloody, but this time, he grins as he reads the arcs and diameters. He reaches for the pot of tea we always drink, and, after a few sips, he says, "It's interesting because according to this, you're dead." After a moment, I suggest, "Should be dead? Dying?" He shakes his head. "No, definitely dead. That's what the stars say."

After we finish the tea, he says, "I wouldn't worry about it. I've been dead for years." I suppose he means this to be reassuring. We burn the paper then walk to the marina bar, and when the waitress asks if we want to wait for a table with a view, or take the first available, I shrug, "It doesn't matter. Apparently everything from now on is a bonus." The astrologer laughs and nods, "That's exactly what the universe has been trying to tell you."

- Joe Mills

Folds II



The boy was born into the Appalachians. Ancient American forests served as the backdrop for a humble life of subsistence. The nights hosted natural musicals and the days were as vast as a calm sea. Rain clouds floated like bloated cotton-swabs, and the humidity of the Old South enveloped him with comforting reassurance. This was a place where the speed of life coasted on the warm air currents, and the line between dream and reality was as foggy as a glass of sweet tea on a midsummer's day.

Appalachia was backcountry; there were no neighbors. The boy's only playmates were the animals that lived around the cabin, and even though most would want a better life, the boy knew no sadness. He felt more at home with his silent companions than with any of the boys he had met at church. He would sit outside in the garden, and the mosses and tall grasses safely tucked him into a pocket of innocence. Old hickories and oaks projected fractal sunspots on his playing field, and the milkweed and laurel danced in the wind.

His usual friends were what one would expect to find in those parts of the woods. Squirrels and groundhogs played *Cowboys and Indians* with him until it neared twilight. However, the boy had a favorite friend. A spotted doe irregularly made appearances on the horizon of his garden. From an early age the boy understood the wild majesty of the doe; its beauty overwhelmed him. Something about the doe filled him with wonder, and though he could never touch it, he

held it close to his heart. Aside from the days the doe made its appearance, the days seemed to blend together, and the boy's childhood was guileless; a childhood of a mountain-boy.

From the cabin, the mother gazed at the boy lovingly. Her mid-day routine consisted of domestic busy-work. She would daydream about a chance to reclaim her lost time. The boy's blissful ignorance reminded her of her almost forgotten childhood. The mother reflected on her own life, and thought about the way we grow from playing *make-believe* with your friends to playing *make-believe* with your spouse. She meagerly smiled, knowing her son's childhood would eventually come to an end.

The boy's father was a mountain man, and if they were to eat, he would have to hunt. Life had made him hard, and after the coal mines shut down, he was forced to hunt again. He, like all men, had grown to realize the hardships of life, and hoped for the best for his son. However, he was not a romantic; he knew he would eventually pass the rifle and blade down. History has a habit of repeating itself, and the footsteps of a hunter through time seldom disappear.

One night, the boy was called inside, and the family gathered round the table for supper. The cabin was humble, and candles dimly illuminated the room where they congregated. They prayed silently, and ate in a similar fashion. The boy's eyes shifted between his parents, sensing a strange heaviness, and noticed their

Suffer Little Children

lack of eye contact. *Maybe this is what it means to be grown up.*

Scripture came before bed-time. The father read Matthew 19, and the boy listened intently. Apart from his father teaching him to shoot, Bible time was the only part of the day they conversed. The boy seldom understood the words, but felt a degree of importance being conveyed, and nodded when his father looked up from the pages. As the oil lamp began to flicker, the boy drifted into his dream-world.

The boy woke up to the clash of thunder. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he looked out the window to witness the approach of a rainstorm. Still in his flannels, the boy slipped on his boots. Proceeding out the door, he grabbed his father's old hunting jacket and stepped outside. The air seemed different from his usual summer days, and as the clouds rolled over the ridges of the Appalachians, the boy sensed a foreign tension.

He walked into his now-vacant garden; the forest were animals unusually absent. As he stepped through the tall grass he noticed his isolation, and wondered if the storm had scared his childhood friends away. Abruptly, the boy heard the slamming of a door followed by a low creak. He spun around to find his father's shed door slightly ajar. Fear instantly crept into the heart of the boy, and for a brief second, he considered running to the safety of the cabin. However, this day was different.

His footsteps echoed into the morning, and every step he took

intensified the beating of his small heart. *Nine, eight, seven steps away.* Anticipation forced the boy to shiver, and goose-bumps rose from his delicate skin. *Six, five, four steps away.* An odd scent spilled from doorway; something pungent. Dry leaves crunched under his boots as he drew closer to the door. *Three, two, one step away.* The boy reached his hand out to the doorknob of the shed. Cold brass embraced his hand, as if the door leapt forward to meet it. He opened the door wide, and let the uncertainty of the next moment meet him.

As the door opened, the father's knife dropped from the doe's ribcage to its throat. The sanguine life-force of the deer flowed uncontrollably from the gaping wound. Tears streamed down the boy's face as the entrails of his sacred friend spilled onto the ground. Horrified, the boy let out a cry.

The father slapped the boy in the face. A smudge of blood stained the boy's cheek, and he stared, appalled, at his father. Their eyes met in a lock. With a blood-stained glove, the father wiped the tears from his son's eyes, and ordered him to put out his hand. The boy did as he was told. Without hesitation, the father placed his knife into his son's hands.

"Now it's your turn; finish what I started."

- Jack Foster



The Courtyard

The city's susurrations follow you in; stop
and listen for it. Waves of wheels and voices crest
and break beyond the pavestone mouth and roll
back. The jetsam hoot of a jarring brake,
the flotsam cough of a name, a name, a name. Then, roll
back. This courtyard found beaches the world away.

The sole light pole, now out, day-sleeping,
is the only sign of today in this old-born alley.
You are not alone here, people have come, left their code:
cig butt clusters by the shrub pots-- not all match, friends', lovers'--
a child's chalk 'scotch squares stacked, dog's ball, spilt flour
wind-spiraled into galaxies. For a moment, you're yourself too.

This is a lonely place full of people. You bring them in with you, out.
The light turns itself on in time; the breeze erodes what you leave behind.

- Anthony Rintala



Folds I

A walk through birch forests

Your company reminds me of
A cold walk through birch forests

The snow shows the friendliness of winter
When you leave behind footprints the sun kneels
Before them then lies on one cheek, so the flakes
Glisten like precious stones, and while I pick up
Every little gem you wander off a different path

When I look up you are gone
Your dark hair blends in the crowd of dead wood.

- Cyndi Gacosta

"The Unicorn." Mandy turns the box around in her hand, the lavender packaging trying to subvert attention from the explosives contained therein.

"It shoots out different colors."

"Hmm." She scrunches her eyebrows while she reads the description of the numerous color combinations of sparks that the firework offers. Her eyebrows are slashes of reddish blonde, and in the sunlight you can't even see them. She darkens them with pencil; she draws light brown around her green eyes and adds some faint purple eye shadow and dark brown mascara. She does this because she thinks she looks ugly without a full face on. She looks like the wrong version of herself, more painted and armed, maybe against herself.

"Is that your mask?" I don't say it out loud. She puts down the fireworks and immediately moves towards the bulk packs on the wall.

"For \$43 you can get a lot of variety," she comments, poking a shiny fake fingernail into the plastic wrapping around the box. "I think I'm just going to get this one. It has rockets."

I nod as I follow her to the cash register, where American flag car magnets are four for a dollar. I feel itchy, ready to leave. Tons of people are milling around, most of them vacationers, and I feel like I'm trapped in their enthusiasm. Some country song about being American is playing overhead and irritating me even more, but I can't leave until Mandy's finished. As is my habit, I abandon the cash register in favor of browsing the racks beside it. Champagne Poppers. Friendship Pdagods. Wolf Snaps. The names entice you to think *wow, fireworks!* in fleeting, happy ways that will make you love them forever, their rarity.

Last time I was in a fireworks store, it was with my uncle, and he wouldn't let me and my cousins touch anything. Now I offer to hold the bag, and Mandy concedes so to better dig in her purse for her keys and her Marlboro Menthols. I feel dangerous for a minute, like a criminal, carrying a whole bunch of legal explosives wrapped in festive 4th of July paper. She makes me put them in the trunk.

"You ever write your name with sparklers?"

I ask once we are on the road.

"Yeah yeah... We used to send bottle rockets into the pond by our house. They make a really deep thud and bubbles come up. We also used to throw bottle rockets."

"Dangerous," I say, and we both laugh.

She bought fireworks for the beach party she's going to with her husband. I just came along for the ride, and the high. Mandy's blunts come from her dad's home-grown crop.

We are neighbors, so when she scurries into her apartment to show Dave the fireworks, I unlock the door next to hers and greet a cat that may or may not be waiting for me. Hank is either terrorizing the apartment or sleeping on the couch. He is, as my psychiatrist says, a "necessary responsibility" that will help me "achieve full rehabilitation." Hank is actually my justification to have a kitten, but I use the therapist's excuse when prompted.

I lolled on the couch, listening to Jimi Hendrix's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Eddie the maintenance man was packing a bowl for me and Mandy. He had come by to fix an emergency kitchen leak, and figured he'd stop by and hang out with his "favorite tenants." His Xanax hook-up, along with his myriad prescription painkillers, made us fast friends. Mandy's perched on the edge of the couch, listening for sounds of her husband's arrival.

How do people feel good without drugs? Everything is a drug, to me. According to women's health magazines, I think of food incorrectly. I am supposed to think of it as "fuel," selecting and savoring my meals with the utmost respect as to what I am putting in my body. But I instead see it as statements; I will eat the peanut buttered banana because that is what I have eaten for lunch since I was four. At 3:30, I will have a glass of chocolate milk because I need the milk and I want the chocolate.

And that's what drugs are; you need to feel good, they satisfy that need. Some you can quit. Some you cannot. I had no problem quitting ecstasy. I never craved it. I am not bothered because I can no longer have chicken nuggets from Kentucky Fried Chicken. Neither substance is available to me.

Eddie passes me the bowl, and the radio switches over to John “Cougar” Mellenkamp’s (I insist on the “Cougar”) “Ain’t That America.”

“Isn’t this song supposed to be ironic?” I cough, handing the bowl to Mandy.

“I think you’re thinking of Bruce Springsteen – Hey baby!” His thought is cut off by a phone call from his wife. I stare at Eddie and Mandy for a second, she anxious on the couch and he lying to his wife. Both of them hide their drug use from their spouses by hanging out with me. Mandy needs “more girlfriends” so her husband doesn’t care, and Eddie’s wife only knows me as “the fat girl with the fucked up sink.” I am not fat, I am skinny and icky, but being “fat” makes me less threatening. His wife thinks her husband feels sorry for me.

I feel sorry for her.

My therapist said that exercise could be a drug, something that I would be healthier “taking a hit of.” So I swim, every other day, at the local pool. When I first started going, I would just go into the gym and sit in the locker room, taking a long shower in their never-ending supply of hot water. Every time I have attempted a long shower anywhere, the hot water ran out. But not at the gym. So I decided I liked the place because of the shower, decided that I wouldn’t get hurt or treated poorly at a place with such a surplus of water. Pool, shower, sauna, hot tub, water park. It had everything.

People also were free there, shy but determined. Elderly people would pace in the shallow end of the pool and handicapped people would be lowered in on a mechanical chair. People who were severely out of shape swam in their initial stages of their new exercise programs, not wanting to feel fat, stupid, and sweaty in front of other people yet. But everyone got out feeling good and more confident. Drugs make you feel good, sometimes instantly. Swimming and drugs aren’t interchangeable, but they are similar.

Every week this summer, there has been a group of teenagers using three of the lap lanes in the pool. They have a coach; they are probably from a neighboring high school swim team. The coach paces the length of the pool and yells encouraging things at the

swimmers, slapping his palm on a clipboard that looks like a flower-covered surf board. I think it’s waterproof, but the paper he might clip onto it isn’t. He is a short, tan person, with dark features and a slender build that, paired with his penchant for wearing white sneakers, long shorts, and bright t-shirts, make him appear like an overgrown boy. Just add a ball cap – boy. The swim team loves him and laughs at all his jokes. They write funny messages about the team on the dry erase board and dissolve into giggles when he references it. But they, him, the team, don’t really interest me.

What I stare at more is his daughter. She’s perhaps twelve, but no older than thirteen. One look at her and I knew she was an ex-cancer patient. She has her father’s dark features, which look darker on her because she is so painfully pale. Her hair is about half an inch long. Her limbs are thin, but her middle has the bloated look that many juvenile cancer patients have, and she’s probably going through puberty as well. Her paleness is what I linger on the most when I stare: the look of someone who has spent too much time inside.

You wouldn’t know she is a girl if you just glanced at her in a crowded room, as her body is almost genderless; it’s still struggling with itself and the cancer. But she wears decidedly girly pink flip flips under her long shorts and bulky shirts. A few of the shirts have charity walk slogans on them, and I know that her family participates in them in that fierce way people develop when their child is still not totally well. Or maybe they aren’t totally well because they are still coming to terms with the horror that their child has cancer. A cancer that might never go away and might always be an undercurrent of their day. They will never move on. I don’t think they can with the same respect for life they had before. Even if your child doesn’t die, she almost did, and you were there.

The daughter knows that she almost lost. In addition to her strange body, pasty skin, and average pre-teen angst, she is no longer young. Sure, she will develop crushes on boys, get upset about her looks and gossip on the phone all night. But she will never be very young inside, because nothing can break you more thoroughly than almost dying.

I look around and am immediately bored. The restaurant has closed for the evening so there's no shift to cover, and Eli, the owner, knows everyone in town will be at the restaurants that border the inter-coastal waterway. People in boats turn on their little twinkling light decorations that they've hung on the tops of their boats and watch from their floating docks, adding to the effect of picturesque summer.

I won't be going. I've been before.

I am instead now at my apartment complex, a weed choked sand pit about 40 minutes from the beach, and I have nothing to do. Well, I can think of a few things that, if I could find them, would dull this ache of inner anxiety. I could read a book, I could watch television. I could read ahead for my summer course in sociology of marriages and families. I might even clean up a little, as my cat had re-arranged the rugs in my absence today. I work in a restaurant, so I rarely feel like cooking. I decide to look for things to do.

I shove a pen, a paintbrush, and a leaking miniature snow globe out of a mug on my bookshelf. I've had the gold and black dust-collector since I graduated high school. Almost six years ago, according to the date. For a minute I worry about my ten year reunion, wonder what everyone will say about me. But it doesn't last, because I have located my Independence Day gift from the maintenance man. A beautiful totem pole of Xanax, a delectable blue cylinder of Vicodin, and a deceptively small Flexaril. I marvel at the shapes in my palm, the mathematical pureness of them. Pills.

Guilt.

Does this count as a relapse?

It's been five months since the last time I did *anything*, and they're more concerned that I stay off of meth or coke than little pills. Hell, these are technically legal anyway; you can get them at a pharmacy. I know they aren't *for* me per se.

One exercise they taught us in rehab was, if we were going to try something again, we should do it in front of a mirror, telling ourselves: "This is not what I really want to do. I can do better than this drug. I do not want this." Then you're supposed to call "someone you've selected as a life line" or write down

what you're feeling or some bullshit.

One of these pills, combined with some weed or a beer, will make me feel better. I won't be sad or worried or anxious anymore. I won't toss and turn; I might fall asleep. I won't have to care and I won't feel bad for not caring.

I go upstairs and look in the mirror.

"I do not want these pills. They are an escape route from myself. I shouldn't run from myself, but rather embrace me." I think about giving myself a hug, but I get stopped by my reflection. My methamphetamine eyes are gone, no longer sunken, dead, wild holes. My nose doesn't have a crust of blood around it or small sores. My skin has color, and my arms don't have raw spots where I used to scratch them.

I hear a thud and laughter through the wall next door, Mandy's apartment. I snap the Xanax into four pieces and shake them around in my palm. A dog barks outside, and I can smell someone's charcoal grill starting up.

I put three of the Xanax pieces in a bottle of aspirin. I leave one on the bathroom sink. I put the Flexaril in a tampon box. I put the Vicodin next to the small square of Xanax. Cupping my hand to hold some water from the tap, I swallow them.

"I wanted to take all of them at once," I tell my reflection. "But I chose two. See."

Jay was a centaur. Broad and muscular on top, scrawny on the bottom. White chicken legs. He was even two-toned; the constant sun exposure from his roofing job tanned him from the belt up. His nose was large and proud. Italian or Indian or something, but beautiful – he was so beautiful.

He was moving on top of me and I wrapped my legs around him, never able to touch enough of him at once. He pushed up on one elbow and looked down at me, still moving. "I'm so in love with you right now."

I stared up at him, and all I could say was "centaur."

He wasn't listening anyway. Or maybe I didn't say it. I don't remember.

Like any mythical creature, Jay was mostly smoke and mirrors, guesses and rumors, and he has since developed into foggy snapshots. He was a drug socialite, a sort of hostess for

the illegal. He'd introduce you to something then move on. He installed me in conversations with heroin, ecstasy, LSD, mushrooms, methamphetamines, methadone, morphine, cocaine, ketamine, pills...

So many new friends to take.

Anything he found, we'd eat. We were hunter-gatherers for high. He delt for awhile, when he broke his foot. They gave him liquid morphine for it, and we took swigs off of it like it was a flask. I threw up in the bushes outside the house. We dropped sweet tarts once and stayed in his room, and I watched his eyes move around his face, watched the waves of heat surround his body. But his body grew larger, more horse-like. He loomed over me, his mouth on mine, and I could taste his magic, his poison powers. In the dark, and my giant dilated pupils gave his kisses the appearance of bruises. I was his shadow, but not his dark side. He never made me that, I did that to myself.

I lost him. He moved away and I wouldn't go. I didn't want to love him anymore, watch him glow with an energy that I would never have. It was a hard thing to do, but he would be better off living away from the network of chemicals he'd created. Difficult to say: Go away, I love you.

I'm laughing. I fell off the wagon, hit my funny bone. You're supposed to laugh when you hit your funny bone, but it hurts. Not so much right this second. Nothing hurts. Water is falling on me and I am blowing my lips together and laughing at the sound of it. I am laughing. I am in a hot shower. I am clean on the outside. I have fallen off the wagon, so I am not clean on the inside. But I'm laughing. Please somebody look at me and notice that I'm just like you, laughing. All of you are always laughing, and now that I get the chance there's no one here to see it. I start to feel tears under the drops of water. I stop laughing as I hear the swim team enter the locker room. My body seizes up. I'm crying.

What I would want before going through death's door, I often wonder; I wish I could ask the girl at the pool what she wanted. It might've been something simple, apple butter on toast, but then again it might've been the scent of leaves burning in the fall air outside her bedroom window.

I'm dead. I should feel excited about life, that I still have one and that the phone calls that I ignore are old friends who still think I'm interesting enough to hang around. But they're just vultures, waiting for me to cave in and finally bite it so that they can gloat about being right about me being a loser, a druggie, a failure, a mistake, a bum, a bitch.

Who was a friend to the young girl at the swimming pool during her fight? I have a multitude of people to call. I think of some right now who, if I had the money, would come here and give me something to take. I want to gobble, I want to ingest.

Everything that Jay began ended with Deason, who died in his sleep of complications between his heart and the meth, coke, and pills he'd ingested the night before. His stepmother, my aunt, found him the next morning. Cold and blue. I'd been with him at some point the night before, and my mom finally figured out why I had become such a scarce and scared person. Intervention. She's a cardiac technician at a branch of a giant hospital; she looks at hearts all night, third shift, so I don't see her very often.

"Hey Mom, you ever see a still heart?"

There's space before her answer. She's called to remind me to see my therapist. The rapist. Her voice is tight as she answers: "You normally only look at ones that are still beating."

She does not want to love me fully again. If she does, I might slip away and scare her again. She was the one who stormed into my room, hysterical over news of Deason. She was throwing my stuff around, knocking things over, finding things. She woke me up from an ecstasy crash, and I was confused.

"What's your fuckin' problem?"

"You're going to end up just like him; you're going to have to go somewhere."

"What're you throwing my stuff around for?"

"You need help and I'm going to make you get it. No more Jay, no more fun."

"Help for what? What're you -"

"Deason died. Becky found him this morning. You know why he died?"

I know how he died. I don't know why.

She took me to rehab. I stayed for nine months, giving birth to this new me at the end. My mother enrolled me in a

community college about thirty minutes away and installed me in my one-room apartment. She found me a job waiting tables. I do every lunch shift, seven days a week. I pay for my rent and my gas; she handles everything else, including the doctor. Waitressing, two night classes, therapy, and swimming. That's all I do anymore.

"You need to schedule an appointment."

"I will."

My July 4th presents are kicking in, and I celebrate by taking out the garbage. I'm feeling good. Good. I notice my shadow swaying as I walk to the dumpster, and I realize how fucked up I really am. I talk to one of my neighbors, but I don't remember what I said, and I don't give a shit anyway, because I'm so high that it doesn't matter. I worry what she might think, but I reason that it *is* a holiday and alcohol is an acceptable drug for anyone to get messed up on. So I'm drunk. I exaggerate my stumbling walk as I go to swing my bag of garbage in, just so anyone watching will know how much I've had to drink today.

Not fucked up on pills.

My phone has rung and friends are trying to get me to come downtown and watch the fireworks. One friend can get us on someone's boat, so we can drift in the water while staring at the patriotic display. I tell them I'll call back, because I'm too fucked up to go anywhere yet and I'm too fucked up to know enough to just tell them I'm not coming. I walk back to my apartment but stop when I see a ladder propped against one side of the building. Looking around to see if anyone's watching, I climb.

It's difficult, because my exaggerated sway has now taken over my body in

reality, and I slip on two different rungs. But I get on the roof. It's a mess, and there are soggy cigarette packets and whippet canisters left all over the sinking and tar-sticky surface. In the fading light, I can see the tops of some scrub trees, the roofs of big beach homes, and the lights from the draw bridge to the beach.

The wind is colder than I thought it would be, and I debate going back down the ladder to get a sweatshirt. I'm interrupted by a sparkling of light in the distance, a shimmering waterfall of gold fire. Its faint crackle is further diminished in the wind, and then a red fan of glittering palm fronds takes its place. My hair ruffles against my ears. I sit and hug my knees to my chest, which is still too bony and beaten to provide me with much warmth.

I marvel at the lights exploding in the sky. Thanks to my pills, I wonder a little too long if I am in fact falling into the glowing colors. I am running across the sky, and I am going to dive into one of these sky mines, I am going to let their fiery bursts detonate me, and I am going to glimmer and be beautiful. Will my mom see? Will my doctor see? Eddie? Mandy? I want to leap across the sky and onto one of those sparkling, glittering blasts. And I want to resurface in the pool, looking up at the girl at the pool, the daughter, the cancer survivor. I am swimming under the sky, and she's at the edge. I want her to try to help me out of the water, but I will pull her in with me. I will hold her head under the water until she's almost out of breath, and then I will pull her up. She will gasp, not only at the explosions above us, but how many times we can die, and how many times we can live.

- Erin McCoy



- Alli Kirkham

tendrils

Erin McCoy

Biographies

Ira Allen

Ira Allen is a teacher of writing, and a PhD candidate in Rhetoric/Composition (Indiana University) and in Media/Communication (European Graduate School). He has published poetry in *Merge: A Journal of Convergent Ideas*, and academic pieces and journalism in various other venues. He looks nervously back, stops entirely, and continues.

David Angelino

David Angelino is an up-and-coming writer, poet, model, and actor. He currently lives in Corona, California where he attends school.

Bermuda

Bermuda currently absorbs English Literature and Language at Cal Poly Pomona. He can regularly be found roaming the back paths and shade covered corners of campus. If he is not lying in the grass, He can usually be found with his head in the clouds. He can often be overheard speaking to Emerson, Henry David, Melville, Walter and on occasion Bermuda. He currently lives in Long Beach and occasionally hangs his hat above the main streets of Pomona.

Martin Brick

Martin Brick is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Ohio Dominican University. Brick's recent publications include stories in *The Cortland Review*, *Vesual Review*, *Sou'wester*, *RE:AL*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *The Shore*, *The Orphan Leaf Review*, and other places. Brick is a former editor of *Wisconsin Review* and a past Pushcart Prize nominee

Rachel Carbonell

Rachel Carbonell is a teacher and writer living in Brooklyn, New York. She maintains a blog, <http://southwilliamsburger.blogspot.com>, and has also been published in *The Vagrant Literary Quality* and *the shadyside review*.

Sakshi Chanana

Sakshi Chanana is a research scholar at JNU in Delhi, India. Chanana is pursuing a doctorate in English literature on the subject of Paulo Coelho's fiction.

Timothy Collins

Timothy Collins is a dedicated but very amateur writer of poetry. He is currently a graduate student at Buffalo State College in Buffalo, New York with ambitions to pursue a doctorate and a career teaching English literature at the college level. Collins completed his undergraduate work at the University of Buffalo with a major in English. He presented a paper entitled, "The Personal Universal: Dead Man and Nostalgia, Their Auteurs and National Cinemas" at the 2011 English Literature Graduate Colloquium at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec in 2011. His poetry has not previously been published.

Christine Davids

Christine Davids lives above a horse barn in Sonoma County, California, where she spends her time reading zealously, writing academic prose and exploring the pleasures of poetry, and dancing to the music of Van Morrison. At present Christine is pursuing her MA in Literature and Critical Theory at Sonoma State University, where she also teaches. Come winter, Christine will turn recluse whilst she works on her thesis, which will examine Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* through a sharply focused feminist monocle. When she grows up she hopes to become a cowgirl, or at least that's what she told her mother when she was six.

Jennifer Donnell

Jennifer Donnell is an emerging poet from Southern California. She hosts a monthly literary series and writes comic books. She has been featured in *The Criterion*, *Orion Headless*, *SIC 3*, *Don't Blame the Ugly Mug* (anthology), *Poetix*. She is also an award winning poet of the city of Laguna Beach- 2009, 2010, 2011. She is currently at work on a full length graphic novel.

Leena Fitzgerald

Leena Fitzgerald currently teaches developmental composition to community college students. She is earnestly attempting to keep her sanity.

Jack Foster

Jack Foster likes beer too much for his own good, but it sometimes makes for an interesting muse, so he continues to drink it on a regular basis.

Cyndi Gacosta

Cyndi Gacosta was born and raised in San Diego, California. She spent a few years of her early childhood in Sorsogon, Philippines. She studied literature at UC Santa Cruz. Her work has appeared in other literary journals such as *The Walrus*, *Monongahela Review*, *The Toucan*, and *Vanilla*. She now lives and works in South Korea.

Scarlett Hackney

Scarlett Hackney is a Maryland native and a graduate of philosophy from the University of Maryland Baltimore County. She is currently working on her Masters of Library and Information Science at LSU. Her poetry and photography have been published in Vols. 23 and 24 of *Clutter & Vine* ("Pecadillo," "Dreamless Nights," "Mirror in Eden," "The Trap of Old Age," and "Abandonment") and in Vols. 30 and 31 of UMBC's *Bartleby* literary arts magazine ("An Almost Daily Hallucination" and "Gearing Up").

Thomas Healy

Thomas Healy is a writer - a writer of fiction.

Alli Kirkham

Alli Kirkham writes short fiction and poetry in Southern California. She is also an experienced layout designer and a rather snooty barista.

Richard Langridge

Richard lives in a small town called Crawley, located an hour outside of London (UK). His background is a mystery, even to those who know him—some say he was raised by wolves, and that he spends his time living as a hermit, or ‘wild-man’; others believe he is of extraterrestrial origin, and that he is here on a reconnaissance mission. What is known for certain is he is an aspiring writer with delusions of grandeur, and an impeccable dress sense. He is a fan of the penny dreadful type of short fiction, and just as with the high-five, he intends to, quote: ‘bring it back’. When not writing, Richard spends his time strumming away on his guitar, and trying to find the money to finally marry his fiancée, Victoria.

Tanya Lipscomb

Tanya Lipscomb is an artist and writer. Her photography captures images of everyday life and her writing does the same.

Erin McCoy

Erin McCoy’s publishing credits are a bit varied. Her short story “All the Good Things You Are” was published in Florida State’s online *InterCulture* magazine (Vol. 5, June 2008), and her academic essay “Not Just a Change of Style: the Americana Commentary of the Grateful Dead’s Workingman’s Dead” is featured in the book *Reason Tatters: Grateful Dead Improvisation as a Postmodern Motif*, published in February of 2010 by McFarland Publishing Company. McCoy is currently working on her doctorate in Humanities at the University of Louisville and hopes to continue her creative writing pursuits along with her academic career.

Joseph Mills

Joseph Mills teaches at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts where he currently holds the Susan Burrell Wall Distinguished Professorship in the Humanities. He also is the poet-in-residence at Salem College. His books include three volumes of poetry: *Love and Other Collisions*; *Angels, Thieves, and Winemakers*, and *Somewhere During the Spin Cycle*.

M.E. Mitchell

M.E. Mitchell lives and writes in Queens County, New York. After retiring from the thoroughbred racing industry, she decided to complete the education she had put on hold years before, eventually earning a BS in Communications and an MA in Sports Management. Previous or forthcoming publishing credits include *Bumble Jacket Miscellany*, *The Armchair Aesthete*, *Threshold Magazine*, and *Mementoes*, a literary journal of the City University of New York.

Anthony Rintala

Anthony Rintala is a Midwestern poet. Part-time adjunct, part-time mastermind.

D.R. Schertell

D. R. Schertell has no personality and, therefore, has lived a dull life undeserving of a biography.

Rabia Shahzad

Rabia Shahzad is a doctoral student in English at New York University, and specializes in nineteenth-century British Literature and empire studies. Her dissertation is an epistemological study of the figure of the fakir in British India. When not slaving away on her dissertation, Rabia finds solace in creative writing. She has been writing short fiction since she was ten years old, and was at her most prolific during her undergraduate days at Mount Holyoke College where she won the Five College Short Story competition.

Josh Stenberg

Josh Stenberg’s fiction and non-fiction has been published in the *Kartika Review*, the *Asia Literary Review*, and in several small journals and obscure anthologies in Hong Kong, Poland, Brazil, and Canada. His translations of fiction by Su Tong have been published in two volumes called *Madwoman on the Bridge and Other Stories* (2008) and *Tattoo: Three Novellas* (2010). He lives, teaches, and studies in Nanjing, China.

Brendon Vayo

Brendon Vayo’s newest work has appeared in *LIT Magazine* and *Seal*. He recently received a doctorate in English from the University of Louisiana and is currently teaching at Concord University in West Virginia.

William Winfield Wright

William Winfield Wright is a Fulbright Scholar and a Fishtrap Fellow, was born in California, lives in Grand Junction, Colorado—where he teaches at Mesa State College—and has published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Field*, *The Ninth Letter*, *The Seattle Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Third Coast*, and elsewhere.

Jennifer Yung

Jennifer Yung is a Chicago-based illustrator and graphic designer currently in New York City. She does work mainly in watercolor, ink, and digital mediums. Her artwork ranges from highly rendered illustrations to abstract oil paintings but all come from a common interest of narration through representation. Jennifer has studied art throughout most of her life and continues to pursue a career in the illustration field.

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